

# Storytelling: Analog and Digital

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The evolving intersection of the Internet, new media, and social networking has been accompanied by an evolution in storytelling practices. Examples of these evolving story-telling practices include community-oriented projects from around the globe, such as Capture Wales (UK), Sharing Stories (Australia), Finding a Voice (Southeast Asia), Men as Partners (South Africa), One Million Life Stories of Youth (Brazil), and Digital Storytelling (USA). Two recent edited volumes chronicle the range of storytelling projects under the umbrella term of “digital storytelling”: *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-Representations in New Media*, edited by Knut Lundby (2008) and *Story Circle: Digital Storytelling Around the World*, edited by John Hartley and Kelly McWilliam (2009). Advocates claim that these new storytelling practices have democratic potential for society and that they enable new possibilities for personal agency, authentic expression, and community development. Before evaluating these claims, let us examine what is meant by the term “digital storytelling” and then clarify the conceptual issues that arise from its use.

## What is digital storytelling?

Practitioners and scholars use the term “digital storytelling” as a convenient label to refer to storytelling that involves computer-based multimedia. Nick Couldry (2008) provides a typical definition: “By ‘digital storytelling’ I will mean the whole range of personal stories now being told in potentially public form using digital media resources” (42). These digital media resources are also referred to as “new media” – the “new” here referring to new *technological apparatuses*, such as digital cameras, digital video and audio recorders, as well as personal computers, workstations, and associated peripherals (scanners, routers, modems, etc.). New media also in-

cludes *computer software and programs* for word-processing, non-linear video editing, photo and audio editing, presentation design and graphics, web-based data management and manipulation and so on. But the “new” in new media also refers to new *sites or public forums* for storytelling made possible by the Internet, such as websites, weblogs, and social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and Second Life, for example). Furthermore, as practitioners such as Joe Lambert (2006) insist, digital storytelling involves a variety of new *practices* for eliciting and developing stories from “ordinary people” (that is, non-professionals) and for transforming and telling those stories in new media.

In discussing the emergence of digital storytelling in the United States, Lambert identifies a variety of influences oriented around the creative expression of “common folk,” such as experimental theatre, performance art, community radio, amateur film and video, social activist movements, folk art revivals, and community arts education. To this mix, Lambert adds the eager adoption and adaptation of new media by artists and the DIY or do-it-yourself movement in order to produce Internet-based art projects, e-zines (electronic zines or self-produced Internet magazines), weblogs, v-logs (video weblogs), and podcasts. Indeed, as John Hartley and Kelly McWilliam (2009, 5) point out, the use of new media in digital storytelling can be considered a new *textual system* or media ecology that challenges mainstream media and corporate control with consumer or user-generated content production, distribution, and consumption.

What distinguishes these storytelling “texts” as digital? Couldry (2008) identifies four features of digital storytelling which distinguish it from what he calls “oral storytelling” and which constitute a common and distinctive “logic.”

They are:

First, a pressure to mix text with other materials (sound, video, still images) and more generally to make a visual presentation out of narrative, over and above its textual content; second, a pressure to limit the length of narrative, whether to take account of the limits of people's attention when reading text online, or to limit the file size of videos or sound tracks; third, a pressure towards standardization because of the sheer volume of material online and people's limited tolerance for formats, layouts or sequences whose intent they have difficulty interpreting; fourth, a pressure to take account of the possibility that any narrative when posted online may have unintended and undesired audiences. (49)

However, we would argue that these "pressures" are not unique to digital storytelling but are recognized constraints in all forms of storytelling. Any storyteller standing in front of an audience is constrained "to make a visual presentation out of narrative" through gesture, dress, and other embodied performance features. Second, storytellers recognize the constraints on their audience's attention and the impact that time and place (such as temperature in the performance space, time of day, and even the hardness of audience seating) can have on the length of a performance. Third, storytellers work regularly with narrative and performance conventions that constrain what kinds of stories can be told, in what ways, in what settings, and for what audiences. Fourth, storytellers regularly exercise selectivity in their material and its performance – in brief, performers adapt material to their audience. Certainly there are differences between different forms of storytelling – such as storytelling at a folk festival and storytelling online in a weblog – but the differences that Couldry identifies are differences in degree and not differences in kind. The use of "oral storytelling" as a contrast to "digital storytelling" suggests two conceptual confusions: first, a confusion over the "medium" of storytelling (as suggested by the use of the modifier "oral"); and, second, a confusion over the communication processes or "logic" of storytelling (as suggested by the use of the modifier "digital").

## A Clarification of Conceptual Issues

Couldry's focus on the conceptual implications of choosing between "mediatization" and "mediation" as terms to clarify digital storytelling obscures a more basic conceptual decision to focus on the "medium" of storytelling as its key feature. If by "medium" one means the channel of communication, then (in semiotic terms) oral/auditory storytelling should be contrasted with visual, thermal, olfactory, and gustatory storytelling. Both "oral storytelling" and "digital storytelling," emphasize the physical channels of sound and light. Thus, the use of "oral storytelling" as a term of contrast reduces "oral" to "voice" and ignores other aspects of embodiment that are utilized in narrative performance – the "multimodality" of storytelling as a visual spectacle and of storytellers that can move among and touch and share food with audience members (such as Bread and Puppet Theatre does).

At the same time, use of the term "digital storytelling" obscures the lived-bodies that produce and consume computer-mediated storytelling (Peterson 2008). For example, the focus on story development and technological transformations can obscure concerns for how audiences – most commonly sitting in front of dispersed and isolated computer screens – can participate in storytelling. As Hartley and McWilliam (2009) acknowledge, the lack of attention to audience embodiment in digital storytelling means that "its propagation and dissemination strategies are hopeless – most digital stories persist only as unused archive; and it has a very low profile on the Net, making little use of interactivity and social networking" (15). All storytelling – whether taking place online, in families, in organizations, or in theatres – is embodied (Langellier & Peterson 2004). From a communication perspective, the challenge is to locate the particular ways that different forms of storytelling handle such issues as "propagation and dissemination" techniques and audience participation.

Now, Couldry himself suggests that he is not using "media" in the technical sense of the physical channel of communication but as a focus on the dialectical processes of communication. To explicate the dialectical processes of communication, we turn to Anthony Wilden's (1972 and

1987) landmark discussion of analog and digital communication. Drawing upon work in cybernetics, psychoanalysis, and semiotics, Wilden (1972) argues that “all natural systems of communication employ both analog and digital communication” (154), pointing out that they are “found together in all communication systems, and at every level of communication” (168). Analog processes are organized around continuous differences, more-or-less variations in continuous phenomena. He gives the sounds of speech (continuous variations in amplitude, distribution, organization, and so on) as an example of analog communication. Digital processes, by contrast, are organized around discontinuous distinctions and discrete, either/or boundaries that separate phenomena. Parallel examples to the analog sounds of speech are the digital distinctions of phonology and the alphabet. Speaking a language, then, relies on both analog and digital processes of communication; so, too, does “oral storytelling.” The “oral,” in other words, involves both analog and digital processes of communication and is not in opposition to the “digital.”

If we take it as given that all forms of storytelling involve both analog and digital processes of communication, then how can we account for the differences that distinguish storytelling in traditional settings (on stage and at festivals, in schools and churches, in conversations and town meetings) from story-telling in computer-mediated settings? One way is to take seriously Couldry’s focus on the dialectical processes of communication that makes it possible for audiences “to be in the company” of the storyteller, as Walter Benjamin (1969) describes it in his essay on “The Storyteller.” In our book on *Storytelling in Daily Life* (2004, 163-168), we take up and extend Benjamin’s example of the difference between performer/audience contact in theatre and in film. In brief, the difference that Benjamin identifies, in his essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” has to do with adaptation that occurs *within* a performance and adaptation that occurs *across* performances. In storytelling where audience and storyteller are in direct contact or co-present, participants can adjust their interaction to each other and to the performance within the event itself. In theatre, to take the exemplar Benjamin uses, the storyteller can utilize the continuities in contact to

adapt to the audience as she or he performs (and vice versa). In film, however, Benjamin points out that the audience is out of direct contact – “beyond the reach” – of the storyteller. The film performer must wait for future films to adjust her or his performance. In the case of film, there is a gap or discontinuity in the contact of audience and performer. In the asynchronous and near-synchronous interaction of computer-mediated storytelling (to focus on the temporal aspect), this gap is reduced but not eliminated.

### **Analog and Digital Storytelling in Practice**

Any attempt to expand the “story circle” of audience and storyteller contact must take into consideration the continuities and discontinuities of analog and digital communication. To illustrate this point, we turn to an example of the digital storytelling workshop process advocated by Lambert (2006) – as the subtitle of his book suggests – to “capture lives and create community.” The workshop we describe is part of a larger effort at the University of Maine, the Somali Narrative Project (SNP), that was founded in 2004 as a collaboration between Somali students and four faculty in Sociology, Women’s Studies, Maine Studies, and Communication and Journalism. The SNP addresses three interrelated goals:

- (1) To document Somali immigration to Maine and to preserve Somali culture through narrative interviews;
- (2) to improve intercultural communication by promoting dialogue and understanding about Somalis in Maine; and
- (3) to engage in community advocacy projects serving the needs identified by members of the Somali community (Langellier 2009, 5).

A common concern identified by Somali students and elders is that “people in Maine don’t understand our history and culture and religion.” As one of several responses to this concern, the SNP determined to produce a general audience book, which would include personal narratives by Somalis in Maine. In order to develop some of the material for this volume, the SNP conducted a two-day workshop on storytelling with a group of eight students.

Thus it was that quite early on Saturday, April 18, 2009, eight students and four faculty (all women, a point we'll return to later) piled into a van and car on the University of Maine campus and headed out to Point Lookout in Northport, a retreat center on the coast of Maine. That first day was devoted to exploring what makes a story and what makes good storytelling. While Somalis come from a long and rich tradition of storytelling, they have less familiarity with written forms of storytelling: a written Somali language was not developed until the early 1970s. As a way of introducing students to immigrant stories, they read excerpts from *I Remember Warm Rain* (2007), a collection of stories by teenagers in Portland, Maine from Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, and Iran (a publication that emerged from a non-profit writing center, The Telling Room: [www.tellingroom.org](http://www.tellingroom.org)). They discussed the qualities that made these selections "good stories" by asking about (1) the point and the point of view of the story; (2) how the story sets up, develops, and resolves dramatic tension; and (3) how the emotional content of scene and voice engages readers as participants in the story.

Then, each student was asked to consider what story she had to tell, why to tell it, and how to shape the arc of its dramatic tensions into vivid scenes, emotions, and images. For the first storytelling round, the students and faculty broke into two groups where students told their stories to each other, receiving encouragement and animated responses from peers and faculty. After a break for supper, students and faculty returned to a second storytelling round where students again told their stories, this time to the whole group, building upon the responses to the first round and receiving a second series of comments, questions, and suggestions. Within each round of storytelling, audiences and tellers continuously adapted to each other. An intake of breath from an audience member could be taken as a sign of interest and identification and thereby encourage the storyteller to elaborate her story. Or, it could be taken as a sign of surprise or shock and discourage further talk on a topic. The highly interwoven play of discourse among storytellers and story-listeners, that moves from storytelling to discussion and back, illustrates the continuous adaptation of analog communication.

At the same time, participants in the storytelling rounds observe what engages the audience's imagination, what storytelling aspects move listeners, what elements intrude or distract from telling a story. These observations and reflections form one basis for adapting and making changes when it is time for another storyteller to take the floor. Another example of such adaptation occurred when one student used a cell phone to call a family member during the dinner break to check on details she included in her story. Thus we see that telling several different stories or telling one story two or three times means that the earlier performances function as a kind of rehearsal when viewed retrospectively from the present situation of performance. That is, storytellers utilize the discontinuities in their experience over time to adapt their performance. In a similar way, audiences build on the discontinuities in their experience to "fine tune" their participation by becoming better informed and more discerning audiences. These ongoing revisions and changes from one performance to another illustrate the discontinuous adaptation of digital communication.

On the second day, the stories generated in the previous day of storytelling were transformed into writing using one of three mechanisms: students composed the story on a laptop computer based on their memory of the previous day's storytelling rounds; or, students used the digital audio recordings from the storytelling rounds as the basis for transcribing parts of their story and revising it as they entered it into the computer; or students narrated their story, this time to a faculty member who would simultaneously transcribe and edit it on a computer. At the end of the second afternoon, each student had produced what would become a rough written draft of their story. All of these mechanisms take up the challenge of moving from one performance context to another. They work to transform the embodied gestures of speech and movement into written expression – not merely a "literal" transcription, but a conscious effort to utilize the expressive conventions of writing to produce a story. In this case, the individual student or student-faculty team relied on the continuous variations in their experiences of performing and audiencing stories to adjust their writing so it "looks right" or "sounds good" and "works well" to tell the story. Analog and digital communication are not

opposed to each other; they overlap and spiral as well as alternate in the shift of storytelling performance to written form.

The next step to “tune” the stories took place after the retreat. The SNP faculty members gathered to discuss the stories and to consider ways they could be revised and edited for a general audience. Based on conversations and written feedback, the stories were then edited by one faculty member and returned to the students for comment, revision, and further editing. Students at this point could accept/reject editing suggestions, substitute alternate material, correct errors, and incorporate new details. These newly revised stories went through a final editorial revising process and then were collected into a booklet, *Bits and Pieces: Stories of Young Somali Women in Maine* (Hough, et al. 2009), for use in the classroom while the larger volume was prepared for publication (scheduled for release in 2011).

It was at the point of seeing their stories in the pre-publication draft that multiple concerns, perhaps dormant and implicit in the workshop, became salient and overt: should students use their names or adopt pseudonyms? Should students allow photos taken by a professional photographer at the workshop to be included in the book? Should they appear veiled or unveiled? How would elders and family members in the community respond to the stories and photos? Would audiences unfamiliar with recent Somali history understand the elliptical references to the civil war and refugee camps? What these and other concerns illustrate are the constraints of changing contexts for storytelling. Because audiences for the booklet would be “beyond the reach” of the storytellers, discontinuities in performance take on added importance.

### **Critical and Ethical Issues**

In reflecting on the workshop process, we see much promise in the contributions digital storytelling can make to “building community” and to the good of society. This promise is particularly evident in the heuristic impact that the workshop process has for its participants. Workshop participants come to know what it is that they have to say about personal experience and important events in their lives; they discover

storytelling as a way to understand who they are and how to take action in the world. This heuristic aspect was illustrated in the SNP workshop during the first evening’s storytelling round when one of the stories sparked an overtly unrelated discussion of the practice of female genital cutting (FGC, also referred to as mutilation and circumcision in other discourses). The discussion erupted with simultaneous and overlapping talk in both English and Somali that was so dense it is impossible to untangle in the digital voice recording that was made of the workshop. Despite the obvious importance of this topic to the participants, no mention of it made its way into the stories or written texts of the storytelling workshop.

We can speculate on the reasons for the presence of this discussion in the workshop and for its absence in the writing that emerged afterward. The most obvious aspect of the situation is the absence of male students or faculty, which may have opened up this issue as a possible discussion topic. So, too, the ability of the students to code-shift between English and Somali makes it possible to exclude the English-speaking faculty from the discussion at the same time that it allows for the comfort of speaking about a difficult topic in one’s native tongue among peers. And, the feminist process employed by the SNP in general, and the participant-centered process of the workshop in particular, creates a safer environment for what is a personal and emotionally-charged issue. The importance of these contextual constraints becomes apparent when moving the stories to print. The transformation to print raises concerns for how others will respond: for example, local concerns for how family and friends will respond, concerns for how elders and the older generation of Somali community members will respond, and more public concerns for how mainstream media might appropriate the stories to the detriment of Somali immigrants in general. Indeed, media coverage in the US tends to use the topic of FGC as proof of the “barbarism” of Islam and of the “primitiveness” of Somali culture. Furthermore, the Somali students are very aware of being marked for surveillance: as women who are typically veiled; as some of the few people of color in Maine; as some of the few Muslims in Maine; as potential recruits for US Homeland Security, and so on.

These speculations lead us to suggest that the promise of digital storytelling is less evident in how it approaches and works with audiences. For the most part, the heuristic emphasis in telling stories (figuring out what I, the storyteller, have to say, or “learning as I go”) is not accompanied by a heuristic emphasis on listening to stories (figuring out what a story means to “me,” as audience, and for “us,” as a community or society) or on communication as a whole. A lot of attention is given to designing workshops that introduce participants to the conventions of narrative and to techniques for moving stories into computer-mediated presentations of one sort or another. However, less attention is given to the situation of the audience and how “common people” might encounter and work with the digital stories generated in the workshops. Digital storytelling challenges mainstream media by turning “consumers” into “producers” of culture; however, when it comes to how it conceptualizes distribution and reception, digital storytelling tends to adopt the same consumerist logic that informs mainstream media practices. That is, the current practice of “sharing” stories on the Internet tends to emphasize dispersed and individuated audience practices of listening /watching and not collaborative forms of participation and responsibility. Posting a story to a website is not working with audience.

As a way to counter the over-reliance on personal narrative and what Hartley and McWilliam (2009) see as a storytelling form that “is too sentimental, individualistic, and naively unselfconscious” (14), we suggest two responses: first, we suggest a theoretical shift to a more critical view of cultural storytelling; and, second, we suggest a methodological shift to a non-individualistic model of storytelling. Amy Shuman (2005) illustrates this theoretical shift in her critique of empathy and the entitlement claims made by storytellers and audiences. She argues that instead of promoting “storytelling in everyday life as a corrective to dominant dis-

course” – as digital storytelling does – we should instead “trouble the divide between situated lives, personal stories, and the contextual productions of meaning” (11). Theoretically, this shift in focus requires that scholars and practitioners work to understand and articulate the continuities and discontinuities, the analog and digital communication processes, of storytelling. Digital storytelling, to use Shuman’s terms, “is as much about the gap in recognizing that other people’s stories are not our own as it is about the use of those stories to make new meanings” (162).

Our second suggestion would shift research from a normative model, which takes the individual in personal narrative as the object of study, to such alternatives as family and group storytelling. Small and large groups, such as families and organizations, employ a variety of strategies and tactics for managing problems of story production, distribution, circulation, storage, and reproduction. Indeed, a family or organization that fails to reproduce its stories over time does not survive. A focus on the strategies and tactics of group storytelling provides a research model that avoids the limitations of conceptualizing storytelling as individual expression. The analog and digital communication processes of group storytelling combine to constitute meanings and identities for the group and for members of the group. At the same time, these communication processes work to organize the group so it can survive over time in both local and more global environments. Group storytelling (as we argue in *Storytelling in Daily Life*, 2004) is always a matter of negotiating boundaries for what can and cannot be told, for what responsibilities and entitlements exist for doing what work, and for identifying what and who belongs and what and who does not. If computer-mediated or “digital” storytelling is to fulfill its promise to enrich society, then scholars and practitioners must attend to both analog and digital communication processes in their theories and models.

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